

The Strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Facing Historical Cycles of Oppression and Legitimation

Limor Nobel-Konig

Bar Ilan University, Department of Political Science, Ramat Gan, ISRAEL

Received: 16 September 2024 ▪ Revised: 11 November 2024 ▪ Accepted: 19 November 2024

Abstract

This study analyzes the strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt facing cycles of repression and legitimation throughout its history. The analysis suggests that the strategic shift into a political activity has proved to be effective, but only for a short period of time. President Morsi must have assumed that the MB in Egypt was closer than ever to achieving its strategic political goals, since for the first time in its history it founded a legitimate political party and won the elections. Reviewing the strategy of the MB in Egypt may lead to describe it as pragmatic. However, the unique nature of the MB as a political movement with a religious affiliation - an Islamic political movement, may challenge the pragmatic nature of its strategy. Thus, the alleged pragmatic strategy of the movement may eventually serve a strategic radical goal rather than lead to moderation.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood, strategy, pragmatism, radicalization.

1. Introduction

The toppling of the regime in Tunisia in January 2011 as the result of an uprising of the people of Tunisia was an unprecedented event in the Arab world and it triggered massive support demonstrations in many countries throughout the Arab world, including Jordan, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt and later Syria. These demonstrations not only supported the change in Tunisia, but also called against the ruling regimes. This turmoil in the Arab world and specifically in Egypt increased the academic interest in the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt – the largest opposition group in Egypt in recent decades.

The MB was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan El-Bana out of a sense of deep frustration from the influences of the British colonial rule on Egypt. As El-Bana described it, the Muslim society became corrupt, withered, and inferior under the British rule. Thus, the movement was founded in purpose to spread and to implant Islamic believes and values among the people and its vision was the retrieve of the superiority of Islam under the *Caliph* rule (Arabic for “Islamic head of state”). The movement was responsible for the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi in 1948, and later in 1981 one of the movement’s factions was responsible for the assassination of President Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat.

The political goals of the movement include changing the regime system through building an Islamic society and state in Egypt and to spread the message of Islam in the world in order to establish a global Islamic nation. This Islamic order will be built gradually through a long-

© **Authors.** Terms and conditions of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) apply.

Correspondence: Limor Nobel-Konig, Bar Ilan University, Department of Political Science, Ramat Gan, ISRAEL.

term process beginning with building and educating the new Muslim individual, family, and society in the Muslim world. The next stages include gaining power through elections, creating an Islamic state, releasing Islamic states around the world from foreign occupation and uniting them into the global Islamic nation.¹

- The repressions of the MB throughout its history made it change its strategy and turn to the political arena to pursue its strategic goals.
- Analysis of the strategy of the MB suggests that the strategic shift into a political activity has proved to be effective, but currently, only for a short period of time.
- The alleged pragmatic strategy of the MB movement may eventually serve a strategic radical goal rather than lead to moderation.

The MB has often been considered as the first wide-ranging, organized, and international Islamic movement of modern times. It has not been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the US Secretary of State. However, the importance of the movement of the MB in Egypt is derived from the fact that since its establishment this movement supplied the ideological foundation for terrorist organizations all around the world (for example, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, Hamas). Additionally, many terrorist organizations grew out of the MB which operated inside and outside of Egypt. Furthermore, between the mid-1940s and 1950 the MB did use terrorist tactics against the Egyptian government and the civilian population.

Thus, the case of the MB in Egypt is relevant to the academic debate regarding the potential transformation of a terrorist or extremist movement into a political party. On the one hand, there is the “inclusion-moderation” hypothesis² that explains the behavior, ideology, and strategy of Islamist movements. It assumes that the integration of the anti-establishment parties and movements can lead to the moderation of their ideology, behavior, and strategy. On the other hand, another approach claims that even if the movement will become integrated within the Egyptian democratic system, it will only use these opportunities to pursue a more radical agenda.³

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the strategy of the MB in Egypt facing the cycles of repression and legitimation in the history of the movement, since its foundation in 1928, through the dramatic events of the “Tahrir protests” of 2011, the toppling of President Mubarak’s regime and the historic rise of MB’s President Morsi in 2012. That historic victory was short and has ended with the rise of President A-SiSi in 2014. This article examines the strategy of the MB in Egypt throughout almost ten decades and provides comprehensive evaluation of the MB's strategy and explores whether the integration of the movement in Egyptian politics may result in its moderation or may in fact lead to radicalization.

2. The strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood since its foundation

2.1 1928 until the early 1940s

In the first period from 1928 and until the 1940’s the movement concentrated its efforts in the establishment of the social movement by propaganda and preaching all over Egypt to increase recruitment, to spread its ideas, and to build its networks. At that time, the MB did not

¹ Aboul-Eneim, Y. (2003). Al Ikhwan al Muslimeem: The Muslim brotherhood, *Military Review*, 3, 26-31.

² Clark, J. A. (2006). The conditions of Islamist moderation: Unpacking cross-ideological cooperation in Jordan. *International journal of Middle East studies*, 38(4), 539-560.

³ Khalil, M. (2006). Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and political power: Would democracy survive. *Middle East*, 10(1), 44-52.

act in violent measures and did not separate itself from the Egyptian society. In the viewpoint of the MB at that time, the solution to the situation of the Muslim world was composed of two stages. The first stage included the expulsion of the Western imperialism and the rejection of its ideas. The second stage included the purification of Islam of all foreign influences to return the original message of Muhammad. When these stages were fulfilled, it would have been possible to renew the glory of Islam and to rebuild the Islamic *Caliphate* ("dominion of a successor"). The Islamic order in Egypt was considered as only a middle stage in the achievement of the strategic goal of rebuilding the Islamic *Caliphate*. Thus, the short-term goal of the MB in that period was to expel the British rule and to begin the establishment of an Islamic order in Egypt that would abolish the existing separation of the religion from the state and would apply the law of *Sharia* (Islamic law) as the constitution of Egypt.⁴

The MB was formulated as a social movement for a specific purpose using nonviolent tactics to accomplish its agenda. At first, the group was simply an Islamic revivalist movement. Thus, the initial strategy of the movement in that period was to achieve their goals gradually by winning the hearts of the people as a preparation for the establishment of an Islamic state. The main components of the strategy included preaching, education, guidance, social activities and building educational institutions that would educate the young generation in the spirit of an Islamic lifestyle. The group established primary and secondary schools for boys and girls as well as technical schools for workers. There were also Qur'an classes and basic skill classes for the illiterate. Many of the Brotherhood's members were recruited from these institutions. As part of its program, the MB set up urban projects that provided jobs for the unemployed and the poor and set up industrial and commercial enterprises that could compete with Egypt's non-Islamic entrepreneurs.

Soon, the MB won the support of the middle classes, who were equally disappointed with the government, the economy, and the continued foreign occupation. While students were being recruited, the MB was also recruiting workers. The movement formed labor unions among workers in many different trades. In its union activities, the MB spread its Islamic ideas among workers.⁵

Al-Banna emphasized the idea of preaching and the use of nonviolent measures. Additionally, he supported the Egyptian parliamentary system⁶. On March 1938, the MB condemned the current Wafdist campaign against the government and in response the Palace publicly embraced the MB and gave them funds, hoping to gain support among the Egyptian people through the support of the MB in the government.⁷

The preliminary strategy of the MB then was to use peaceful measures to change the political order. The MB wrote a letter to King Fuad in 1933, which was ignored. In 1936, al-Banna wrote a letter to King Farouk, the prime minister al-Nahhas Pasha to make them reject the Western influences and to adopt an Islamic reform. These letters were ignored as well.⁸ Later that year, Egypt signed the "Anglo-Egyptian Treaty" that granted the local Egyptian government

⁴ Mitchell, R. P. (1993). *The society of the Muslim Brothers* (Vol. 9). Oxford University Press, USA; Aboul-Eneim, 2003.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Moussalli, A. S. (1993). Hasan Al-Banna's Islamist discourse on constitutional rule and Islamic state. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 4(2), 161-174.

⁷ Lawrence, B. (1998). *Shattering the myth: Islam beyond violence*. Princeton University Press; Rinehart, C. S. (2009). Volatile breeding grounds: The radicalization of the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32(11), 953-988.

⁸ Al-Husaini, I. M. (1981). *The Moslem Brethren, The Greatest of Modern Islamic Movements*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press.

greater autonomy and control. Up until 1938 al-Banna urged King Farouk to dismantle the corrupt political parties in Egypt. In late 1938 and early 1939, the palace cut funds to the MB because they were suspicious of their activities.

As time progressed, the militant groups that al-Banna created within the Muslim Brotherhood were created for purposes that are more violent. The Rover Scouts were first formed in 1931 by al-Banna and their purpose was to keep order at the Brotherhood's meetings, to march in parades, or to escort al-Banna in public. The Battalions were created in 1937 as a personal army of God. Their training was akin to that of a professional army. Lastly, the Secret Apparatus was created in approximately 1939 or 1940 as a Special Forces part of the Battalions. All these groups were loyal to al-Banna and were commanded by him.

2.2 *The age of terror: 1940s until the 1950s*

Al-Banna gradually radicalized his beliefs until the point terrorism was considered as a legitimate alternative for achieving the MB goals. The MB has developed a political orientation that was very anti-Western and opposed to secular politics. The early writings of al-Banna indicate that he believed that only through prayers and faith the goal of reforming society would be fulfilled. Later, shortly after the creation of the MB in the early 1930s, al-Banna made *Jihad* one of the ten principles that Muslim Brothers must commit to become part of the MB. Finally, in the late 1930s, al-Banna considered *Jihad* as obligatory for every Muslim.⁹

In 1945, when al-Banna ran for parliament, the election was rigged, and the MB lost their seat in Ismailiya. After this defeat, the MB assassinated Prime Minister Ahmad Mahir Pasha. Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi who took over on 25 February 1945 accused the MB of this assassination. Al-Banna and several other Brothers were arrested but the attorney general later released them. Consequently, al-Nuqrashi had the MB under surveillance and restricted their ability to meet although he later revoked this order and then quickly reinstated it. Al-Banna stated that the Brotherhood was directing all its actions toward the Islamic government who should have implemented the Brotherhood's reforms. Additionally, al-Banna warned al-Nuqrashi that he would call for jihad and lead it himself.¹⁰

Therefore, at the mid-1940s the MB began the use of terrorist tactics. As the MB had been creating militant sectors within the movement since 1931, by the mid-1940s it had operated the secret military wing, the Secret Apparatus, which initiated terrorist attacks against the Egyptian government and the civilian population. Demonstrations and protests in the streets were organized and the MB was calling people to arms and al-Banna continued to call for *jihad*.¹¹ In 1946 the MB were blamed for attacks in Cairo and Alexandria and the civil war between the Brotherhood and al-Nuqrashi began shortly afterward. In 1948, the MB fought under the Arab League in the Arab Israeli war that began on 15 May 1948. The MB had approximately 75,000 militant members by the late 1940s and had developed an army that infiltrated the Egyptian army with intentions to overthrow the Egyptian government.¹²

⁹ Rinehart, 2009.

¹⁰ Haag, M. (2005). *The timeline history of Egypt*. Barnes & Noble; Eickelman, D. F. (2002). *The Middle East and central Asia: an anthropological approach*. 4th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc; Rinehart, 2009.

¹¹ Al-Husaini, 1981.

¹² Nobel-Konig, L. Terrorism's effectiveness: Examining terrorism strategy in achieving political goals. In: Sazonov, Vladimir, et al. (Eds.). *Cultural crossroads in the Middle East: The historical, cultural and political legacy of intercultural dialogue and conflict from the ancient near east to the present day*. University of Tartu Press, 278-314.

When al-Nuqrashi found out that the Brotherhood had been participating in combat units the Egyptian government began to fear the growing strength of the Brotherhood and recognized the danger the group posed to state security. Consequently, al-Nuqrashi imposed military law and outlawed the MB in December 1948. He claimed that the group had plotted revolution against the government and had repeatedly carried out terrorist attacks. The movement was outlawed and was declared as an illegal organization. Al-Nuqrashi banned the Brotherhood and all its publications. He also ordered that all their documents were seized. In response, the MB assassinated El-Nuqrashi in December 1948.¹³ Al-Bana was assassinated in retaliation in 1949.

The MB was forced underground as it tried to regroup after the loss of its founder and leader. After the Wafd party regained power in 1951, the Brotherhood was temporarily allowed to resume activities under the restriction to cultural, social and spiritual services alone.

2.3 The oppression under Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime (1954-1970)

The relationship between the MB and Gamal Abdul Nasser's "Free Officers' Movement" began in 1946. When Nasser and al-Banna met in 1948, al-Banna was convinced that Nasser could achieve a large basis of support in the military for a revolution in Egypt and that the cooperation between them will advance it faster than an independent struggle of the MB for an Islamic revolution. Sharing many of the same goals, the MB gave their support to the "Free Officers' movement" in the early 1950s in its attempt to overthrow the government. The Officers succeeded with the MB's help and set up a government under the leadership of Nasser in 1952. However, by 1953 the MB realized that the "Free Officers' movement" vision of the state of Egypt was of a secular state, in contrast to the MB's vision of an Islamic state. Once in power, Nasser offered the MB only a position in the Wakff office (the office responsible for religious affairs) and an appointment to function as Egypt's Mufti (spiritual leader and judge). Furthermore, Nasser was subjected to pressures on the part of the "Free Officers' movement" that refused to fulfill the vision of al-Banna's Islamic state. Nasser's regime was secular and was based on the ideas of nationalism and socialism.¹⁴ Nasser's signing of an agreement with the British rule in 1954 signified the beginning of a crisis between his regime and the MB as well as the beginning of one of the darkest times in the history of the movement.

On 26 October 1954, one MB activist tried to assassinate President Nasser as he delivered a speech in Alexandria. Considering this failed assassination attempt, the movement was severely oppressed by Nasser. Several hundred MB leaders and members were arrested, and many were tortured. The property of the MB was burned by mobs. The movement was once again outlawed, and its organization was prohibited. Consequently, many of its members went underground and fled to neighboring Arab countries. The Egyptian government continued to violently repress the MB in the following years as the leaders of the MB were arrested, persecuted, and executed. By 1965, thousands of MB members were arrested and tortured. Those who went underground were again faced with the task of rebuilding the organization while consciously avoiding confrontation with the government.

Facing this repression, the MB movement began to splinter into moderate and radical factions. Both factions retained the same goal (that is, the creation of an Islamic system of government in Egypt) but disagreed on the means of attaining this goal. More moderate and traditional members of the MB supported the idea that political activity is the only affective option to change the existing political order in Egypt, and thus they should operate within the existing

¹³ Brynjar, L. (1998). *The society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928-1942*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press; Rinehart, 2009.

¹⁴ Aboul-Eneim, 2003.

political system. Radical members, however, believed that the attempts to change the system from within were futile. These members, inspired by the writings and leadership of Sayid Qutb, supported only the option of an armed struggle.

Nasser had severely repressed the MB and tried to eradicate them. However, his attempt was unsuccessful because the MB movement was too deeply imbedded in Egyptian society and would eventually reemerge. Despite its severe repression, the MB movement continued to attract members from the lower and middle classes and began to rebuild its power base. They quietly criticized the government but strongly and consistently denounced violence and criticized the armed struggle of the radical Islamic groups.¹⁵ This strategic shift to political activity and the idea that it was no longer legitimate to use violent measures to change the regime system was a crucial element in the survival of the MB movement.

2.4 Partial Legitimation under Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981)

Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat, the Vice President during the presidency of Nasser, succeeded him as Egypt's president after Nasser's death in 1970. Sadat initiated a process of political and economic liberalization that by 1976 allowed the activity of institutionalized political parties in Egypt.

The situation of the MB movement under Sadat's rule improved greatly. Sadat negotiated with the MB's leadership in prison that eventually led to the release of most of the movement's imprisoned members with the permission to renew its public activity and its publications. Sadat encouraged the emergence of an Islamist movement in Egypt, believing it would be socially conservative and he gave them considerable cultural and ideological autonomy in exchange for political support. However, Sadat continued to support the policy that banned the political organization of the MB movement and extended the order prohibiting their transformation into a political party.¹⁶

The strategy of the MB in that period included reorganization and political participation in the political process. The MB managed to integrate into the Egyptian political arena through their representation in parliament, bypassing the political parties and the nongovernmental organizations laws that banned the organizing on a religious basis.

The crisis in the relationships between President Sadat and the MB emerged in 1977 after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and peaked in 1979 after the signing of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. The peace agreement with Israel made the MB organize massive nonviolent demonstrations in Egypt and publicize criticism against Sadat which led once again to the incarceration of MB leaders and members. On 6 October 1981 one of the movement's factions was responsible for the assassination of President Sadat. Sadat was succeeded by his Vice President, Hosni Mubarak.

2.5 The oppression under President Mubarak's regime (1981-2011)

The presidency of Hosni Mubarak began in 1981 and lasted for three decades, which can be divided into three central periods: The first period between 1981-1990 is regarded as the continuation of Sadat's liberalization process and the beginning of a limited process of democratization in Egypt. The second period between 1990 and 1995 was a period of crisis, while the Egyptian government struggled against a wave of terrorism inflicted by extreme Islamic

¹⁵ Aboul-Eneim, 2003; Mitchell, 1993.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

organizations. The third period began in 1995 and consisted of Mubarak's extensive political reforms and ended in 2011 with the fall of Mubarak's regime.

During the first period during the 1980s and until the beginning of 1990s the MB focused their strategy in rebuilding its wealth and power. The movement gathered assets as banks, schools, factories, and mass communication organizations. In addition, the MB identified the professional organizations as an important source of supporters and in the 1990s they gained control of the powerful doctors', lawyers', and engineers' syndicates. They returned as a force in university politics as well.¹⁷

At the political arena, the MB found more ways to continue to bypass the constitutional limitations that were inflicted on the movement since 1954 which banned its participation in elections as a political party. Their strategy included the formation of alliances with other legitimate parties and running with independent candidates. In 1984 they formed an alliance with the Wafd Party and won 58 out of 488 seats in parliament. In 1987 they formed an 'Islamic Alliance' with the Labor Party and won 17 percent of the general vote, making this coalition the major opposition to President Mubarak's National Democratic Party.¹⁸ The formation of this Islamic Alliance was a major advancement in the spreading the MB's political agenda openly.

Despite the authorities' awareness of the movement's political and social activities, since Mubarak came to power and until the 1990s his government turned a blind eye, or consciously disregarded, the MB activity. Mubarak's new regime aspired to keep the MB movement out of the violent Egyptian Islamic movements section. Additionally, the government needed legitimacy for its democratization process, which would be difficult to achieve without the support of the MB, the largest opposition group in Egypt, in the legislation initiations of Mubarak. Indeed, the MB did not object to Mubarak's second term in 1988.¹⁹

However, in the beginning of the 1990s Mubarak's attitude towards the MB had changed and the period of crisis and confrontation had begun. There were several factors that contributed to this shift. First, Egypt suffered a wave of violence and terrorism in the early 1990s inflicted by extreme Islamic organizations such as Al-Jammat al Islamia and Al-Jammat al Takfir and Al-Hajara. Second, the rise of the MB's power and popularity in Egypt was considered as a threat by Mubarak and he used this instability to weaken the MB and to generate crisis in their relationship that would allow him to restrict their activity and to pursue them, especially considering the upcoming elections in 1995. Third, Mubarak's success in defeating the extreme Islamic movements made the inclusion of the MB in the political process unnecessary anymore, since the fear that the MB would otherwise join the extreme section was no longer relevant. Thus, the period of the oppression of the MB had begun and lasted until 2011, while Mubarak made efforts to disconnect the movement from its power sources (their civil institutions and associations) and to weaken it by restrictions and extensive arrests.

In 1995, even with many of its leaders and most efficient organizers in prison, the movement had 150 candidates competing in 17 governorates. It was the first time in the movement's history that they had such many candidates and covered such a large geographical area. However, only one MB member managed to become a parliament member.²⁰ In the elections

¹⁷ Nedoroscik, J. A. (2002). Extremist groups in Egypt. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 14(2), 47-76.; Yohannes, O. (2001). *Political economy of an authoritarian modern state and religious nationalism in Egypt*. London: The Edwin Meller Press.

¹⁸ Nedoroscik, 2002.

¹⁹ Yohannes, 2001.

²⁰ Nedoroscik, 2002.

of 2000 the MB's independent candidates gained 17 mandates and, in the elections of 2005, they gained an unprecedented representation in the Egyptian parliament of 88 members (20%).

The MB's actions reflect the central guiding line of the MB's strategy during Mubarak's presidency which was to use legitimate means to gain power, support, and influence. The MB managed to use the new political space that was created during the liberalization and democratization process to gather the Egyptian people's support and sympathy. This strategy allowed the MB to return as a major force in Egyptian society and politics despite their persecution and the restrictions inflicted on their activity.

2.6 2011-2013: A historic victory following by a historic defeat

The protests of February-April 2011 in Egypt were not the result of the planning or the organizing by the MB movement. Furthermore, the movement was careful not to take active participation in the protests until it was clear that it was not an expendable opportunity but an historic turning point in the history of Egypt which might allow the MB to advance their political goals. Shortly after the fall of Mubarak's regime the MB officially registered its political party "The Freedom and Justice Party" (FJP) and took power in June 2011. Its leader, Mohamed Morsi, became Egypt's first freely and democratically elected president.

Gallup poll of June 2011²¹ found that 89% of the Egyptian public were willing to participate in what 91% of them believe will be an honest and fair election. Freedom of speech has been a top political aspiration as 92% of Egyptians include freedom of speech as a provision if they were drafting a new constitution for a new country. At the same time, religion remains important to most Egyptians (96%), and 92% say they have confidence in religious institutions. However, most Egyptians express little interest in recreating their country in the image of Iran as less than 1% say the Islamic Republic should be Egypt's political model. Most Egyptians (69%) think religious leaders should provide advice to government authorities, as opposed to having full authority for determining the nation's laws. Most importantly, the poll found that the support rate of the MB political party in June 2011 was only 15% of Egyptians. Clearly, the support for the FJP has increased dramatically in the upcoming months.

The MB after the age of Mubarak was the most organized political power among the Egyptian public. Additionally, the movement's comprehensive socio-economic infrastructure place it in a comfortable starting point compared to other forces that participated in the Tahrir protest. In the first two rounds of the parliamentary elections held in November and December 2011 the MB won approximately 40% of the votes in the first round and approximately 47% of the votes in the second round. At that time, it was considered as a great victory to the movement and as an important strategic milestone.

However, after only one year in power, Morsi was toppled through a military coup backed by popular protests in June 2012. This failure is rooted in a combination of political, economic, and social factors. The MB has failed to make the needed transition from a vocal opposition movement to a ruling force. The MB moved abruptly from being an opposition movement for almost eight decades, to become Egypt's ruler without the ability to adjust its ideology and behavior to this drastic change. In addition, the MB encountered tremendous

²¹ The poll, conducted in April 2011, surveyed 1,000 Egyptians aged 15 and older between late March and early April, and quoted a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

<http://www.abudhabigallupcenter.com/147896/Egypt-Tahrir-Transition.aspx#1>.

political, social, and economic challenges that required fundamental changes in the movement's discourse and strategy.²²

Morsi's government was not inclusive, and it created alienation of large publics among the Egyptian people. Morsi's government failed to address the profound economic crisis that Egypt has suffered in the past decade, including high unemployment, inflation, and a widening wealth gap. In addition, Morsi's government made some controversial moves, such as granting the president powers through a constitutional declaration and an attempt to promote an Islamist-leaning constitution. The MB was designated an illegal organization again at the end of this revolutionary episode. The current regime under President Al-Sisi maintains significant control over the political landscape, with limited space for opposition.

3. Conclusions

The review of the history of the MB movement shows that President Nasser and his successors, Anwar Sadat and Mubarak, have alternatively repressed and demonized the MB in Egypt or tolerated it as an opposition. The repressions of the movement made it change its strategy and turn to the political arena to pursue its goals, rather than continue the use of violence. This strategic shift allowed the movement to transform itself into a political entity and to remerge in Egypt as a political movement instead of disappearing.

Analysis of the strategy of the MB movement since its establishment suggests that the strategic shift into a political activity has proved to be effective, but currently, only for a short period of time. President Morsi must have assumed that the MB in Egypt was closer than ever to achieving its strategic political goals, since for the first time in its history it founded a legitimate political party and was able to participate in elections, after decades of being prohibited to organize politically.

According to the approach of "inclusion-moderation," the MB in Egypt would be a part of a democratic order, as the movement has become a moderate movement in recent decades, and its objective is to advance the idea of creating an Islamic state in Egypt not by a revolution but by a gradual political process and by winning the votes of the Egyptian voters. This is considered as a supportive indicator of the calculated moves and gradual advancement in the strategy of the movement. The fact that the leaders of the Islamic Jihad around the world relate to the MB in Egypt with contempt and abhorrence, for what they believe the MB's temptation of thousands of young Muslims to be inducted to the ballot box instead of to the holy war (Jihad) allegedly supported these claims.²³

On the other hand, another approach claims that the movement has never abandoned its aspirations to pursue a more radical agenda. Furthermore, there have been no substantial shifts in the attitudes or the agenda of the MB, but only marginal changes that have not touched on the main vision of the MB, namely, to establish an Islamist state. Consequently, according to this approach, it is almost impossible to assume that the MB's Islamist party would accept the values of a democratic and liberal society since those are, in fact, in total contradiction with its own proclaimed values.²⁴

²² Al-Anani, K. (2019). The Inclusion-Moderation Thesis: Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

²³ Leiken, R. S., & Brooke, S. (2007). The moderate Muslim brotherhood. *Foreign Affairs*, 86, 107-121; Al-Anani, 2019.

²⁴ Khalil, 2006.

In 1994 the MB issued a publication “Our Testimony” in which the movement declares its commitment to political activity and denounces violence:

“...Thus, as the Muslim Brotherhood, we reiterate our rejection of any form of violence and coercion as well as all forms of coups which destroy the unity of any nation... The Muslim Brotherhood dissociates themselves totally, without any hesitation, from all kinds and forms of violence and we denounce terrorism of any form and from any source...”²⁵

However, the MB’s claims concerning its commitment to political activity with no support of any form of violence arouses criticism among scholars. This criticism claims that the MB movement conceals its extreme views and if you listen carefully, you will hear the movement’s two voices. One voice in Arabic that is aimed at the Muslim and Arab audiences around the world, which highlights anti-Western messages and support terror organizations. The second voice, in English, is aimed at all other audiences, which highlights messages with terminology of human rights.²⁶ The MB’s media speaks with rather an intermittent voice, delivering an incoherent message whose tone is changeable and fluctuating and that cannot be claimed to truly represent the heterogeneity of the group.²⁷ The debate over the use of violence represented one of the main points of disagreement between two groups within the MB. On the one hand, the historical leadership led by Mahmoud Ezzat rejected any use of violence and insisted on peaceful methods as the only approach to be followed. On the other, the new leadership adopted a more pragmatic approach that permits the use of violence within certain limits to weaken the current regime and drain its forces.²⁸

Thus, as for the notion whether the MB is a moderate or extremist movement, there are divergent views, often shaped by the historical, political, and social context in which the MB operates. The group’s willingness to engage in electoral politics and its emphasis on gradual, non-violent change are seen as indicators of a moderate stance, as well as the MB’s official rhetoric that often emphasizes Islamic principles alongside modern democratic values, such as pluralism and social justice. However, the MB’s founding ideology, which sought to establish an Islamic state governed by Sharia law, contains inherently extremist elements. The perceived duality in its approach — publicly espousing democratic values while allegedly harboring more radical, anti-democratic objectives creates ambiguity that may challenge the movement’s true intentions.

Al-Anani²⁹ claims that “the case of the MB shows that in fact, it was repression, not inclusion, that played an important role in shaping the Brotherhood’s ideology and behavior, particularly under Mubarak. The Brotherhood improved its stance on political pluralism, individuals’ freedoms, and women and Christians’ political rights to broaden its support, improve its relationship with other political factions, and enhance its political gains.”

According to the theory of pragmatism the meaning of a concept is a matter of the practical effects of acting in accordance with it.³⁰ Thus, pragmatism is a method of establishing the meaning of concepts in terms of the experiential consequences of applying them,³¹ and as Rorty

²⁵ “Our Testimony,” Issued in 1994. <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=4185>.

²⁶ Nobel-Konig, 2020.

²⁷ Mellor, N. (2017). *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: da'wa, discourse, and political communication*. Routledge.

²⁸ Fahmi, G. (2018). *The debate over the use of violence within the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after 2013*. European University Institute.

²⁹ Al-Anani, 2019.

³⁰ Bacon, M. (2012). *Pragmatism: an introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press.

³¹ Peirce, C. S. (1997). *Pragmatism as a principle and method of right thinking: The 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism*. Suny Press.

described it more simply, pragmatism is about what are the most effective ways of achieving what we want to achieve.³² Schwartz & Galily argue that the willingness of the MB to participate in the democratic process is a compromise and a concession to the seizure of power by force. When it is possible and convenient the MB sometimes acts within the framework of the law, and sometimes undermines it. Most Islamic movements in Arab countries are persecuted by the regime, so they must recognize reality by joining the government and usually operate within the framework of the law, otherwise they will not exist.³³

Reviewing the strategy of the MB in Egypt throughout its history may lead to describe it as pragmatic. However, the unique nature of the MB as a political movement with a religious affiliation – an Islamic political movement, may challenge the pragmatic nature of its strategy. The term *Sabra* (in Arabic “patience” or “endurance”) is valued in Islamic teachings and in the political context the meaning is a long-term strategy that will lead to the desired strategic goal, which is in the case of the MB, an Islamic state. The basic understanding was that on its way to concur the West, the movement needs to use as many as possible modern tools that do not contradict the Islam. Thus, the alleged pragmatic strategy of the movement may eventually serve a strategic radical goal rather than lead to moderation. The debate over the movement's moderate versus radical aspirations is likely to continue as the political and social landscape in Egypt and the broader region evolves. In the end, the Egyptian people will decide their future and what will be the role of the MB in this future.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

This article is partially based on PhD dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Department of Political Science (2011).

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Aboul-Eneim, Y. (2003). Al Ikhwan al Muslimeem: The Muslim brotherhood. *Military Review*, 3, 26-31.
- Al-Anani, K. (2019). The Inclusion-Moderation Thesis: Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Al-Husaini, I. M. (1981). *The Moslem Brethren, The Greatest of Modern Islamic Movements*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press.
- Bacon, M. (2012). *Pragmatism: An introduction*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Brandom, R. (2011). *Perspectives on pragmatism: Classical, recent, and contemporary*. Harvard University Press.

³² Brandom, R. (2011). *Perspectives on pragmatism: Classical, recent, and contemporary*. Harvard University Press.

³³ Schwartz, D., & Galily, D. (2021). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Ideology vs. Pragmatism. *Open Journal for Studies in History*, 4(1), 1-10.

- Brynjar, L. (1998). *The society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The rise of an Islamic mass movement, 1928-1942*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press
- Clark, J. A. (2006). The conditions of Islamist moderation: Unpacking cross-ideological cooperation in Jordan. *International journal of Middle East studies*, 38(4), 539-560.
- Eickelman, D. F. (2002). *The Middle East and central Asia: an anthropological approach*. 4th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Fahmi, G. (2018). *The debate over the use of violence within the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after 2013*. European University Institute.
- Haag, M. (2005). *The timeline history of Egypt*. Barnes & Noble.
- Khalil, M. (2006). Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and political power: Would democracy survive. *Middle East*, 10(1), 44-52.
- Leiken, R. S., & Brooke, S. (2007). The moderate Muslim brotherhood. *Foreign Affairs*, 86, 107-121
- Lawrence, B. (1998). *Shattering the myth: Islam beyond violence*. Princeton University Press.
- Mellor, N. (2017). *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: da'wa, discourse, and political communication*. Routledge.
- Mitchell, R. P. (1993). *The society of the Muslim Brothers* (Vol. 9). Oxford University Press, USA.
- Moussalli, A.S (1993). Hasan Al-Banna's Islamist discourse on constitutional rule and Islamic state. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 4(2), 161-174.
- Nobel-Konig, L. (2020). Terrorism's effectiveness: Examining terrorism strategy in achieving political goals. In: Sazonov, Vladimir, et al. (Eds.). *Cultural crossroads in the Middle East: The historical, cultural and political legacy of intercultural dialogue and conflict from the ancient near east to the present day*. University of Tartu Press.
- Nedoroscik, J. A. (2002). Extremist groups in Egypt. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 14(2), 47-76.
- Peirce, C. S. (1997). *Pragmatism as a principle and method of right thinking: The 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism*. Suny Press.
- Rinehart, C. S. (2009). Volatile breeding grounds: The radicalization of the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32(11), 953-988.
- Schwartz, D., & Galily, D. (2021). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Ideology vs. Pragmatism. *Open Journal for Studies in History*, 4(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojsh.0401.01001s>
- Yohannes, O. (2001). *Political economy of an authoritarian modern state and religious nationalism in Egypt*. London: The Edwin Meller Press.

